

April 14, 2006

VIA ELECTRONIC FILING

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch
Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
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Re: Notice of *Ex Parte* Communication of GrandCentral Ventures, Inc.
CC Docket Nos. 96-45, 98-171, 90-571, 92-237, 99-200, 95-116, 98-170

Dear Ms. Dortch:

On April 14, 2006, GrandCentral Ventures, Inc. ("GrandCentral") forwarded the attached article from the April 12, 2006 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle to Ian Dillner, legal advisor to Chairman Martin.

The article describes in detail the free voicemail services being provided by GrandCentral to the homeless in San Francisco. In addition, it describes free voicemail services provided by other companies that provide services to the indigent nationwide.

As has been explained in GrandCentral's prior filings, these free services, which are completely aligned with the broad policy objectives and goals of the Universal Service Fund ("USF") would be unsustainable in a numbers-based USF contribution methodology without a specific exemption from such contribution. GrandCentral continues to urge the Commission to explicitly create this exemption if the Commission moves to a numbers-based USF contribution methodology. This free services exemption is needed above and beyond any exemption for Lifeline services; otherwise, the continued viability of these free services will be in jeopardy.

Respectfully submitted,



William B. Wilhelm, Jr.
Douglas D. Orvis II

Counsel for GrandCentral Ventures, Inc.

Enclosures

cc: Thomas Navin
Thomas Buckley
Amy Bender
Ian Dillner
Scott Bergmann
Dana Shaffer
Scott Deutchman

SFGate.com[Return to regular view](#)[Print This Article](#)**Startup will help homeless**

- David Lazarus

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

Beginning Thursday, a San Francisco startup tech company is going to help the homeless reconnect with society.

The company, GrandCentral Communications, will offer free voice-mail service through local shelters. Users will be able to dial in from anywhere to access messages from, say, family members, social workers or potential employers.

"It's a stake in the ground," said Craig Walker, GrandCentral's chief exec. "It's a tether to the rest of the world."

Free voice mail for the homeless isn't new. A Seattle nonprofit organization called Community Voice Mail, for example, offers similar services nationwide to homeless people, disaster victims and others in need.

In GrandCentral's case, though, the company will offer voice-mail numbers for life (the life of the company, that is), as opposed to the five or six months of temporary service typically provided by Community Voice Mail.

GrandCentral is also working with San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom's Project Homeless Connect, a program that makes services available to homeless people at events held roughly every other month. The next takes place Thursday at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium.

"As individuals take a step closer to self-sufficiency, having a phone number can be very helpful as a support system," said Alex Tourk, Newsom's deputy chief of staff.

Frequently, for example, a homeless person attempting to re-enter the workforce has no means of being reached by an employer. GrandCentral's service, Tourk said, can make all the difference in helping someone get back on his or her feet.

GrandCentral's Walker isn't exactly a tech-world neophyte. He previously served as CEO of Dialpad, an Internet phone service that was purchased by Yahoo last year for an undisclosed sum.

Walker, 40, left Yahoo a few months ago for his new business, which he said is well funded by San Francisco's On Demand Venture Fund. Walker said GrandCentral will unveil a commercial service this summer, but he declined to discuss details of the offering.

He acknowledged, though, that a free Internet voice-mail service -- similar to free e-mail services like Hotmail -- will be part of GrandCentral's operation.

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"It's part of a larger system that's yet to be launched," Walker said. "That system will be a for-pay service, and that will subsidize what we're doing for the homeless."

Registration for the free voice-mail service, dubbed Project CARE (as in Communications and Respect for Everybody), will begin Thursday at Project Homeless Connect and expand during the coming weeks to shelters throughout the city, he said.

Participants will receive permanent use of a personal number with a 415 area code. There's no limit to the number of messages they can receive or the number of minutes messages can run.

Voice mail can be checked using a personal identification number from any phone. Users can record their own greeting, and no indication is given to callers that the service is different from any other voice-mail system (there are no ads or other giveaways).

There are an estimated 7,000 chronically homeless people on San Francisco's streets. Walker said his system couldn't handle all of them overnight. "But we could certainly accommodate hundreds right away," he said.

More capacity will follow, Walker said, after GrandCentral introduces its commercial product (whatever that may be precisely).

"Project CARE was made possible because these features are in our service," he said. "There's a need that can be addressed, and we saw that we were in a position to do it."

More info on the system can be obtained by e-mailing projectcare@grandcentral.com.

Reaching out: Sunday's column focused on letters that AT&T is sending to DSL customers that neglect to mention lower-priced options as introductory rates end. It drew a huge response from readers who were miffed that the company seemed to be deliberately steering them into its most expensive Internet plan.

It also seems to have prompted AT&T to rethink its tactics.

On Monday, the company e-mailed DSL Express customers with a new pitch. "In celebration of your anniversary and to show our gratitude for your continued membership, we're offering you a couple renewal options," it said. "Choose the option that is best for you."

This is a marked switch from the earlier letters, in which AT&T said that "in celebration of your anniversary and to show our gratitude for your continued membership, we would like to make it as easy as possible for you to keep enjoying all of the many benefits you have come to rely upon from your SBC Yahoo DSL service."

The letters encouraged customers to do nothing and to have their DSL service automatically change to a month-to-month rate of \$34.99.

I pointed out in my Sunday column that you can do much better by calling a service rep or going online, where an offer could be found to upgrade to AT&T's faster DSL Pro service for just \$17.99 monthly.

And guess what? This week's e-mail from the company says that besides the option of paying \$34.99 a month for DSL Express, customers have the choice of going online and upgrading to DSL Pro for, yup, just \$17.99.

AT&T spokesman John Britton denied that the e-mail was in any way a response to what I wrote. "We're fast, but we're not that fast," he said.

Rather, Britton insisted that the letters and e-mails are all part of the company's marketing efforts.

In any case, AT&T says customers looking to take advantage of the \$17.99 deal should visit sbc.com/upgradeoffer before April 30.

David Lazarus' column appears Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Send tips or feedback to dlazarus@sfgchronicle.com.

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